

Artículo de investigación

Value of literature in language teaching: problems and principles

El valor de la literatura en la enseñanza de lenguaje: problemas y principios

O valor da literatura no ensino da linguagem: problemas e princípios

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Abstract

Language and literature are two different subjects in the field of language teaching. Yet, if compared and analyzed, they undergo similarities and hide nuances. While the former is distinct from the point of view of a teacher, for a learner they are the same and twin brothers – literature is language. This paper, presenting some literary examples, contends that literature is a rich source for English language teaching, especially if it is used from the early years of education. It can be used in English teaching classes with respect to the language level, the cultural background, the age, and the tastes of the learners. A food without salt and spice may seem tasteless and so is language teaching without the use of literature.

Keywords: Teaching English - English Literature - Foreign Language - Traditional way - Progressive Outlook

Resumen

El lenguaje y la literatura son dos temas diferentes en el campo de la enseñanza de idiomas. Sin embargo, si se comparan y analizan, sufren similitudes y ocultan matices. Mientras que el primero es distinto desde el punto de vista de un profesor, para un alumno son los mismos y hermanos gemelos: la literatura es el lenguaje. Este documento, que presenta algunos ejemplos literarios, sostiene que la literatura es una fuente rica para la enseñanza de la lengua inglesa, especialmente si se usa desde los primeros años de la educación. Puede usarse en clases de enseñanza de inglés con respecto al nivel de idioma, el contexto cultural, la edad y los gustos de los alumnos. Un alimento sin sal y especias puede parecer insípido, al igual que la enseñanza de idiomas sin el uso de la literatura.

Palabras clave: Enseñanza del inglés - Literatura inglesa - Lengua extranjera - Forma tradicional - Perspectiva progresiva

Resumo

Linguagem e literatura são dois tópicos diferentes no campo do ensino de línguas. No entanto, se eles são comparados e analisados, eles sofrem semelhanças e escondem nuances. Enquanto o primeiro é diferente do ponto de vista de um professor, para um estudante eles são os mesmos e irmãos gêmeos: literatura é linguagem. Este documento, que apresenta alguns exemplos literários, argumenta que a literatura é uma fonte rica para o ensino da língua inglesa, especialmente se usada desde os primeiros anos de ensino. Pode ser usado em aulas de inglês no que diz respeito ao nível da língua, contexto cultural, idade e os gostos dos alunos. Uma comida sem sal e especiarias pode parecer insípida, assim como o ensino de línguas sem o uso da literatura.

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Palavras-chave: Ensino de Inglês - Literatura Inglesa - Língua Estrangeira - Forma Tradicional - Perspectiva Progressiva

Introduction and Background

Until about the middle of the 20th century, teaching English in colleges and universities almost everywhere meant teaching of English Literature. After the Second World War, nearly all countries colonized by Britain gained political freedom one after another and while formulating their educational policy, all these countries had to make up their mind about the place of English in their curriculums (Brumfit, 1985; Brumfit, 1983). This more or less coincided with the emergence of linguistics as a subject of great importance all over the world and under the umbrella of Linguistics, psychology and certain other related disciplines, a great deal of thinking and rethinking was done about how best the third world countries could teach English in view of their limited resources (Brumfit & Carter, 1986; Curran, 1976).

After the initial hostility, nearly all countries decided to teach English for the purpose of augmenting their economy through science and technology (Carter & Michael, 1991; Daiches, 1970). They all felt, however, in the area of English for Special Purpose (ESP) provided a new direction to English Language teaching and the general feeling was that during the first few years the learners of English as a second or foreign language should master the basic language skills and then they should specialize in the ESP related to their profession or ambition in life (Eliot, 1951; Pound, 1954). The teaching of literature was considered an academic luxury. Universities which lacked a progressive outlook, continued, however, with the teaching of literature in their traditional way, thinking that it was too much of a bother changing over to the new philosophy of teaching English (Richards, 1929). Because of their mistaken sense of validity, many other policy makers thought that teaching literature the way it had been done for decades was the only sensible thing to do by way of teaching English. It would be in order here, therefore, to examine why if at all, English literature should be taught in countries where the need of the hour is only to teach functional English (Frye, 1964).

Reasons for Teaching Literature

(1)- It is sometimes assumed that the materials and strategies for teaching the basic language skills are not emotively sustaining or imaginatively exciting. This assumption has been one of the main reasons for the partial failure of most of our language teaching programs. The problem with many of our language teaching drills and exercises is that they are lifeless, dull, dry and puerile. Little do many of us realize when designing our substitution tables, fill-in-the-blank exercises and so on that they are meant not to be tried on mechanically driven robots but on complex living and loving individuals.

Existential philosophers tell us that the greatest problem of the man of today is his feeling of alienation. He feels lonely even when he is in the middle of a crowd. He feels he is emotionally starving, spiritually suffocated and intellectually crestfallen. Like Characters for Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, he feels that he exists no doubt but he hardly ever lives. One can disagree with this agonizing view of life and say that the existential philosopher's jaundiced view of life is an act of exaggeration and over generalization and that life is an opportunity and not a curse. Whether life is an endless drudgery as some believe or a blessing as some others do, it cannot be denied that we all welcome something that is emotionally exciting and intellectually elevating and so, if we make use of literary flashes to illuminate our otherwise dull and dry exercise, learners will find learning to be an enlivening and energizing experience. Those who advocate an effectively based methodology of teaching, Simon et al (1972), Curran (1976) and Stevick (1980), for example, argue that teaching must engage the whole person inside the learner in the sense that it must address itself to all the deeper and more abiding needs of the learner. The apparent, localized need of a language learner in the classroom may be only to acquire the linguistic means of communication being focused in that lesson, but his unstated and enduring need underlying this apparent need is to obtain from whatever he does a sense of exhilaration and illumination, a sense of extension and augmentation. In language learning this can be achieved only by integrating language with literature. One or two examples of how

literature can illuminate language teaching may not be out of place here. Suppose a teacher is teaching defining and non-defining relative clauses in English. By way of illustrating these two types of clauses, he will in all probability use, as teachers of grammar nearly always do, flat and insipid examples like the following:

- (i) The man whom you met yesterday is a cobbler.
 - (ii) London, which is the capital of the United Kingdom, is very crowded.
- But if he has the knack for teaching language through literature, he can give enlivening examples like the following:
- (i) Blue are the hills that are far away.
 - (ii) The man who enters his wife's dressing room is either a philosopher or a fool. (Balzac)
 - (iii) Someone who is born in a stable is not necessarily a horse.
 - (iv) He who can does; he who cannot, teaches. (Shaw)

For teaching punctuation, most teachers would tend to use lifeless sentences like the following illustrations:

If you go there, you will certainly meet him.

But if a teacher wants to teach language through literature, he can use illustrations as follows:

- (i) A book is a mirror: if an ass peers into it, you can not expect apostle to look out.
- (ii) If you are afraid of loneliness, don't marry. (Chekhov)
- (iii) Ah, don't say you agree with me. When people agree with me, I always feel that I must be wrong. (Wilde)
- (iv) If God lived on earth, people would break His windows.

A teacher teaching sentence patterns in English but not particularly interested in making his examples enlivening and attractive would tend to give some boring illustrations like the following:

- (i) Birds are flying.
- (ii) Dogs are barking.

But if he wants to teach language through literature, he would give examples like the following:

- (i) Minor poets imitate; great poets steal. (Eliot)
 - (ii) Great writers create; writers of small gifts copy. (Maugham)
 - (iii) A poem should not mean but be. (MacLeish)
- For teaching S+V+O pattern, he would give examples like the following:
- (i) Your tale, Sir, would cure deafness.

(Shakespeare)

(ii) No philosopher could endure his toothache patiently. (Shakespeare)

(iii) Faith will move mountains.

(iv) Empty vessels make the greatest sound.

(v) The happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history. (George Eliot)

For teaching the S+V+C pattern, an unimaginative teacher would give examples like the cow is a four footed animal / but an imaginative teacher would illustrate this pattern with examples like the following:

(i) A critic is a man who knows the way but can't drive the car. (Tynan)

(ii) Prose is the words in their best order; poetry is the best words in the best order. (Coleridge)

In my view, a teacher should, for making his language teaching inspiring, select examples with literary flavor, examples which, because of the moving truths that they contain, suddenly illuminate the learning and teaching atmosphere like a flash of lightning in a dark night. Oscar Wilde once said, "if a woman can't make her mistakes charming, she is only a female". In a like manner, I would like to say a teacher cannot make his teaching interesting, he is not a teacher; he is only an unwelcome wage earner who has mistakenly drifted into a professional incompatible with the very essence of his personality.

The type and quality of literature to be used as material for language teaching will depend on the age and the cultural background of the learner and on the level at which language teaching has to be done. Fairy tales, for example, will be useful for language lessons for children; parables, anecdotes, simple short stories, etc.

(2)- One of the major difficulties of some of the very poor learners of foreign language, as for some of the very poor learners of English in Iran, for example is that they cannot organize their ideas in a coherent and cohesive manner. Different parts of their sentences pull in different directions, there being no inner unity of ideas in the sentence. Some of the basic ideas in certain sentences are missing with the results that those sentences turn out to be mere unorganized piles of unconcerned words and phrases. The following is one of the actual examples of such incohesive and incoherent writings.

There are some features or rules which ruled out by the Shakespeare in his plays. Such as these in

Macbeth (Do not know) it is new phrase and it enriched the language by Shakespeare. And also (know not) the meaning is you don't know. He made it in exchange position to make good sound and rhyme for the sentences.

(3)- Many people wrongly think that excellence in the use of language can be achieved by mastering the mechanics of grammar. The more you know grammar, they think, the better your English will be. In order that we can clearly understand the role and limitations of grammar, it would be useful to have a clear idea of what it really means to be able to use language.

(4)- But can literature in no way strengthen the skeleton of our language use? In my view, literature functions like some of these mega nutrients which not only strengthen our muscles and enhance and energize the life-giving constituents of our blood but also vitalize our bones. Grammar teaches us language and it also teaches us about language. When reading literature, we do in a sense learn the language intuitively though not explicitly as we do in the case of grammar.

As far as teaching about language is concerned, literature can sharpen our analytical awareness of the structure of a language by providing elegant examples of the patterns and structures in that language. This does not mean that literature can and should replace grammar; it only means that literature can and should supplement and invigorate the analytical awareness to be imparted by grammar and that an evolved reading of judiciously selected literature can not only develop excellence in the use of language, it can also enrich our analytical awareness of how language functions at the level of grammar.

It is often thought mistakenly that by doing functional courses in language, i.e. in reading, writing, grammar and the like, students should acquire a reasonable degree of the mastery of the basic mechanism of the language before they should start reading literature. The complexity and creativity in the use of language in literature is of a much higher order than in the day-to-day use of language and students should build a solid linguistic foundation before they build a superstructure. This attitude seems to have its roots in the unstated but widely held mistaken assumption about literature.

To overcome such challenges to a certain extent it is also suggested that literature can underscored as a subject of study from the early ages. If literary texts which are no doubt more interesting and enthralling for the kids are placed and utilized suitably in the curriculum of primary ages, they will benefit more; clearly a kid is more interested in and follows the exciting and humorous adventures of Harry Potter than a mere picture book of a worm on tree or some repetitive ordinary texts. Exploration of new literary texts motivates primary age learners of a foreign language to apply and compare them to their real life and actual personal experiences.

To put it in a nutshell we argue that as a food without salt and spice sounds tasteless, literature and culture are the spice of life granting it variety. Accordingly, as a progressive trend, teaching a language and its functional courses and patterns can be done more effectively through literature. Literature acts as a source of motivation; it offers a wide range of interpretations, explorations and styles leading to personal development and growth.

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